

SPECTACLE CITY

an allegory

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Dedicated to
everyone I love
(you know who you are)
but mostly to

Joseph Charles Trethowan
(1925 - 2011)

fleshmarket
press

DERBY DAY

As one who in his journey baits at
noon, Though bent on speed, so here
the archangel paused Betwixt the
world destroyed and world restored.

MILTON

The dream spectator, the contemplator of the
fleeting laws of impalpable universes, is easily
recognizable on the streets ... Their faces are
lit by the flames of still unextinguished visions,
their arms mechanically groping among the
shadows for something to lead on.

ARKADII DRAGOMOSHCHENKO

Why, may not imagination trace
the noble dust of Alexander till he
find it stopping a bung hole?

SHAKESPEARE

DERBY DAY

Spectral City

An illusory city, verging on total dissipation behind its grey veil of fog. Bent on speed, you plummet towards it. Dawn gains its flesh as the sky pales gradually, and the apparition assumes a form in the middle of a cloud.

The city is a spectre of your imagination, and the shadow of mine. It will dissolve like the fog, its ethereal residue left hanging in the air, left lingering in your mind like the recollection of a dream. Dissolution is the fate prescribed for all illusory things: be they cities, screens of vapour, hallucinations, or allegories, you only know how to behold them when they no longer bind you. Like a dream puzzle solved by awakening logic, truth occluded by formless vapours clings still to the skyline of your mind once you have been roused.

Already I've revealed how the illusion will end: the abstraction dissolves, and the truth prevails. But before I tell you the beginning, you must first fall into the middle of it all. So you puncture the flaccid skin of suburbs and inject yourself intravenously into Spectacle City. Once sufficiently dissolved to circulate through its vital channels, your sensory faculties yield to the signals its nerves transmit to yours. You feel only what is felt by the city, and no longer distinguish shadows from the material that cast them.

Dispersions

A scaffold of violet sky looms aloft, and upon it hangs a film of electric coloured lights that gloss the air and bleakly illuminate the threads and webs of skyscrapers. Lighted windows are arranged like games of dominoes in the ash-coloured buildings; a cool stillness pervades the blackened roadways, the blue-lit alleys, the humps of inert rubbish. Spectacle City may or may not be the dwelling place for shadows, so let us simply call a trowel a shovel and identify them by means of application: Spectators.

Spectators are numbered in millions; not many, to be sure, but several million all the same. Some of them have garlic breath, many have a vagina, and several avoid paying their taxes. Recreational pursuits often include: sitting and watching syndicated television programmes, sitting and watching sports matches, sinking piss, taking trains, inspecting the collections of the picture gallery, absorbing news about the weather's apocalyptic fluctuations or the exorbitant cost of petrol, and gambling. Spectacle City boasts many such diversions designed to divest diligent and attentive Spectators of their

\$. This dignifies its designation of a *liveable* city.

Now, as the sun rises, the city becomes filled with oblong strands of silver light, edged and offset by dense concrete shadows; and presently chrome-coated passenger trains begin to drop clusters of Spectators to the many workplaces in town.

They are cloaked with fog still, and clutch pale grey satchels or vibrant backpacks, and conceal in the lining of their neat attire things like palm-sized telephones, calfskin wallets, condoms, lunch-money, lozenges of foil containing analgesics or chewing gum, pocket-fluff. Many conceal excrescent and grotesque bodies in rigid suits or angular dresses; many soak their tired eyes in pancake-batter makeup or conceal them altogether with sunglasses; and many more of them queue for cups of coffee. Mostly the commuters stick to practiced routes of rectilinear exactitude like red blood cells clinging to a flood of plasma.

Some of the people who work in Spectacle City work in cubicles, some in windowed offices; some in kiosks or kitchens. Some travel from the vast expanses of distant outer suburbs on crowded trains with tabloids in their possession, some travel from marble breakfast nooks with no spilt orange juice and prior to departure kiss a child goodbye who merely gapes at the morning cartoon programming. Spectators flood indiscriminately among the neat, grey glaciers of buildings: cool, tumbling floods of commuters charge amidst the slim fissures of grey streets.

Hours pass; the morning passes; and presently the commuters establish themselves at their cubicles and activate their computers. Sometimes the computers seize up so it becomes necessary for the user to slap their behinds cased in plastic to jolt them into action. But mostly, computers are considered to be functional things: they are not merely mechanisms to facilitate deferment and distraction via role-playing games and social networking apparatus, but are utilised for such varied functions as mathematical equations, conveying prompts to telephone interviewers, the production and propagation of pornography (subsets of which include: amateur, bestial, scat, necrophile and foot-fetishist) – and the processing of words, a practice performed sometimes by little allegorists as they endeavour to formulate a documentary sheaf of the city's prosodic machinations, attempting a cartography of its arbitrariness referring to the tincture of the nebulous fog and the precision of the architecture it shrouds, to the fabric of the suburbs and the synthetic texture of the skin of its residents, to the proliferation of the use of fluorescent lighting and the negative cultural atmosphere it elicits, to the moral abstraction that pervades the city's

every channel in spite of the meticulous establishments of law and order set to extinguish it, to its reliance on that which is virtual and constructed, its reliance on the structure and vision of itself declaimed and marketed by the instruments of its government, its reliance on its runts and fuck-ups to sustain its balanced order, etc.

As well as offices, there are bars and retail outlets and cinemas and concerts to kill time in Spectacle City for those who like them, and there are drugs too if you think that all those things are shit. If you want speed, a gram costs something like two hundred dollars; if you want cocaine, maybe three hundred. I cannot remember how much ice is because I do not use it these days, it's a pretty shit drug as far as they go, but if you would really like some I could talk with some people and do my best to sort you out. If you know who you are dealing with, ecstasy tablets cost twenty dollars apiece. If you don't, they are thirty. They don't work so well for me these days so I tend to shelve them. That means shove them up my arse. If you were to ask for my advice, I would recommend that you just eat acid and binge on as much nitrous oxide as your means allow. You will feel more connected with the universe after that.

So let us propose, in brief, the whole subject of the present work. Fifty million years ago, when volcanic action severed the land bridges which connected Terra Australis to the top of Asia, Terra Australis was left an island, but an island of such size as to rate the status of continent. The continent is largely composed of arid soil unscratched by the ploughs of civilisation: the Great Australovian Fuck All occupies nearly two thirds of it, and Spectacle City, with all its attractions and other concomitant aspects of liveability, is signified by a touch of the cartographer's pen at latitude thirty seven degrees and forty nine minutes south, and longitude one hundred and forty four degrees and fifty eight minutes east.

This fathomless pen-point of ours on the ochre leviathan of Terra Australis – turning its back on the continent, casting its eyes adrift through a shipping port – indicates a city bound to its settlement by speculators: and its ephemerality having been treated of, I think, with sufficient hyperbole, let us move right along to the narrative present. It is the year of our lord two thousand and five; the Federal Commonwealth of Terra Australis is one hundred and four years old, and in a certain important place a certain phenomenon will occur – i.e., it actually will happen.

Smokescreen

Alexander Smokescreen, whose misadventures about town this weekend make up the subject matter of this story, was not born to signify all the asphalt and cigarette butts and constant frustration and impossible dreams of the city that generated him; rather, he was born small, loud, and covered in slime (and, as we presently shall learn, he'll die lean, strungout and greasy at the age of twenty-three). Until a few years ago, Smokescreen was renowned for his affability and intelligence, and was widely conceived of as a good bloke, but then suddenly he stopped seeing any point in desiring anything for himself other than contemplative seclusion, or secluded contemplation, or whatever, and ever since then he has managed to get along just fine without doing anything really useful with himself. One life, one of so many threads of life here, ravelling out from the spool of this city, only to be chopped like a length of thread once it is sufficiently drawn out... he used to study philosophy, and is therefore acutely aware of his mortal condition. The way of all flesh – temporary, mutable, restless – is the lot of Alexander Smokescreen, though his mother had named and raised him to do greater things than to simply *exist*.

The mist of Smokescreen's mouth forms a pale little cloud in the chill of this morning, and as he traverses the streets he sighs aloud, his head plaintively switching, as though to rebuff the gentle drizzle which sprinkles over the back of his neck. The air is thick silver still, and overcast, as he walks to the markets; the city surrounding him is still soaked in spring fog, its towers as inseparable from the clouds as though composed of vapour and not concrete. Church bells conflate in the pale atmosphere, combining with bird-sounds and the clamour of trams, as the narrow young man conducts himself through the streets, dressed in a child's waistcoat, tattered, and creased woollen trousers. His hair is dark and flecked prematurely with grey, and even though his narrow shoulders are high, he walks always with a slouch. Alexander goes out into the street and slowly, somewhat irresolutely, begins to walk around, as though he is unable to make up his mind about something; but this speculative stance of his, which he has only lately adopted, is offset somewhat by the shopping trolley he pushes, which looks just as though it could belong to a granny. At the present moment, Smokescreen is off to purchase the week's groceries for his household, and with even step and musing gait, his pale lower lip curled in concentration, he sets out along the damp streets. Perhaps at this point we should take careful note of his structural similitude to the setting: his flesh tone ashen, his close-set



eyes glinting streetlight sallow, and his jaw-line sculpted sort of like a tramcar; his long sloping forehead and aquiline nose, his incisors yellowish brown and pointed, and his bone structure imperial notwithstanding his apparent malnutrition and general scruffiness. In his appearance, Alexander is not *plain* in the sense of unnoticeable, but whereas Spectator A might consider him comely, Spectator B would equally and oppositely consider him ghastly. Alex, frankly, could be inclined (whatever the weather) to consider himself neither, or both; in his own mind, he could be a master of all guises, a nonessential form that transforms its appearance according to his whims and moods. It seldom occurs to such persons as Smokescreen that they are merely nondescript, or simply do not possess the integrity of a stable form; not that he's inclined to think highly of himself – the opposite, more often than not – rather, he's more inclined to think of others thinking highly of him, or perhaps, being spoiled, that is just what he is used to.

As I mentioned earlier, a few years ago he was renowned for his quick wits and easy charm; at twelve, he was awarded a full scholarship for six years of schooling at a famous private school for boys, and up until quite recently, he was studying law and philosophy. But the only trait of character worth dwelling on here (for his inconsistent temperament has been perpetually in flux, as of late, and this cursory outline was never supposed to equate with his curriculum vitae) is that Smokescreen is quite unable to speak his mind to others: it is very seldom fixed upon a single thing for longer than a few hours, and as such he has acquired a habit of muttering to himself as he walks along, or even engaging in lengthy discourse with his own mirror image. As for now, he is unfussed about the morning drizzle, though it seeps into his inexpensive suit and torn, untidy shoes: Alexander foresees a fine and foggy day ahead, that with any luck should stay glowing beneath this veil of precipitation. For the vernal drizzle is an inexorable constituent of city life, its intrusion as invariable as the nasal twang of the local accent.

He feels fresh and full of potential this morning, listening to the songs of silver doves pouring from their ersatz nests set in window arches. Today is a day, he reckons, for *getting things done*: four days off work stretch out before his measured tread, because it is the weekend preceding the first Tuesday in November. The public holiday heralds the Spectacle Cup, a horserace which is said to stop the nation. The day off work is official only in the state of Austral Felix, the verdant wedge whose capital is Spectacle City.

The event is a point in space and time

And Smokescreen is walking through the city and he is listening, as I have walked through the city and I have listened.

Now Smokescreen, listen to this: the city casts its shadows upon you this morning, and it sits and watches while your thread unravels. You are an arabesque cast upon the arch frame of this place and its lintel is embroidered with your slender thread. Yet the threshold would still take its parabolic bend even if it were unscratched by your story... but where is the point in saying such things? A point, on its own, has no dimensions, but we can only find a point in space if we know how to look through the dimensions it's concealed in. Similarly, truth can only be seen if its beholder knows how to look at it; and if you try and speak it aloud, it will just dissolve in the air sooner than it can reach the right ear. So have I betrayed my purpose, or merely bound and gagged it? Besides, where is the point to be seen in such a space? Where is the point amidst this confluence without synthesis, amidst this fatal abstraction, Spectacle City?

The point sits there silently in the miasma, all on its own; for truth is the line, freedom the square, and genius the cube.

So let's cut this line out for Smokescreen to take up his preferred nostril, that he, at least, might feel himself shiver when he getsz to whatever's embedded in its depths. For now I have decided how to really begin.

Good morning

Now Spectators swarm the silver streets as Smokescreen drifts irresolutely, towing along his granny trolley. But the conclamation is getting unbearable to him, more so than usual, because cackling flocks of Punters keep coursing past him on their way to the Derby today.

Besides all the Punters, Smokescreen sees the spectrum of Spectators typical to a Saturday morning: there are early morning families, black coffee couples, and jogging enthusiasts in fluorescent Lycra with wriggling hips like eels upright; he sees the slow geriatrics who look very alone, and the scum of the earth heading to their pathetic weekend retail jobs to serve everybody else.

Many Spectators are at ease from having spent the previous night at a cinema or restaurant or party or club; several of them got lucky and most of them did not. Some Spectators have nothing better to do with a Friday

night than sit and watch box sets of television shows, just for the hell of it; who might have nothing else but box sets, and who might eventually couple up with another person like them, forcing aside the feeling of loathing, to marry and fuck with them unflatteringly and rear awkward children, whom they will raise to sit and watch things. Today Smokescreen feels particularly as though he's hemmed in by the swarming Spectators, and he blames the Punters for that. People are much louder and more difficult to deal with when the treat of a race meet is suspended before them, because unlike a dog being forced into obeisance, Punters *know* that they will get their reward because they feel as though they have already *earned* it. Smokescreen hates having to trouble himself with Punters taking up space in the street, Punters taking up airtime on the telly, filling the paper, and packing out the trains; they make the whole city quite unliveable, frankly, and he wishes the Spring Racing Carnival would just hurry up and end.

Now he casts his eyes across a flock of female Punters shivering in the wind as they descend upon the tram stop; the morning air is chilly even to Alexander, who is dressed far more suitably to face it, and the covey of colours in which they are garbed seems false to his eyes, like counterfeit colours. 'Vanity,' he mutters aloud, involuntarily, for he is prone to infecting his speech with the refuse of his thoughts; the whole Spring Racing thing makes him feel unutterably weary, besides; and 'vanity' is a word he particularly enjoys turning about in his thoughts, along with 'pride.' His trolley quivers and his mind plaintively wanders as he strides along Elizadeath Street, through the clamour of its tram-bells and the calls of its avaricious birds; and notwithstanding the noise, the heaviness, the electrical sparkling of tramlines and the foggy smell of spent petrol tanks, the whole city has a muted aspect for him this morning, as though it is in reverie. Clusters of ladies are strewn along Elizadeath Street, dressed in mauve and cerise, and with floral ephemera attached to every angle of their millinery; Smokescreen passes them waiting for their tram to Phlegmington, and they appear to gaze absently out of the frame of reality like figures from a Gainsborough portrait, clearly consumed by a desire to be watched and admired. Smokescreen offers their uniformly vulgar racing attire scarcely so much as a glance; he merely spears a crust of excess earwax with a pointed fingernail, and continues on his way to the market.

Vanity

All the tragedies, defamations, ominous facts, and all the means by which to sell a newspaper, the conceit of activists, the gut-wrenching safety of total surveillance, the perverseness, the dissociative ideologies courted by the insecure; failure, flatulence, drug dependence, dysmorphophobia, call centres and the slaves they feed off, failure to adequately digress, any negativity, the delusion of self-identity, any who seek to avoid the sense of abject terror at all costs, the weary self-effacements in the name of modesty, anything that lacks drive and dynamism, emerging writers, writers who do no steal, misrepresent, or skew their material, the remembrance of dreams, nineteen year old girls who think they know everything, facial piercings, fake orgasms, all that squirms, yields, and bends over backward; passive aggressive daggers to the heart, the intrinsic vanities of ungrateful bipeds, pedantry, the wilful misanthropy of one at their wit's end, perfectionism, she'll be right, the private school competitive streak, racism, the national behaviour, sex faces, grant application procedures, the opponents of fiction, student societies, lack of sincerity, refusals, awkward dancers, romance, re-assurances, self-esteem, the fashionable, the straight edge, the clique of passionless band members, ballads, soloists, megalomaniac composers, soap operas, the unseen spectrum of opportunities, those lacking perspective, the ambitious, the smell of used linens, roaches, experimental fiction, bloggers, whatever is suburban, fluorescently lit, unwholesome, polystyrene, narrow, underdressed, distant, cold, half-sodden, costly, obese, intellectual, misogynistic, seductive, malodourous, fast, kiddy fiddling, *the drunken hours of taciturn dejection*, defensive logic, men who come too quickly, the slippery slope of the guilty, sixteen year old boys who reckon their girlfriend's simple, nineteenth century novels not written by Russians, the scornful, the brave, the imprecision, self-abnegation, canned laughter and crocodile tears, the bigoted, the internet, recreational drug takers, binge drinkers, structural ineptitude, the balancing act of self and psyche, women who love too much, the itching crotch, excessive vanity as a means of self-empowerment, inaccurate use of prepositions, the self-assurance of an absolute beginner, human desipience and the self-congratulation of the inhumanly moral – before these rank crypts, *which I blush to name*, it is time to meet the gaze of your own eye in the mirror.

Market

The Queen Victoria Market, where Alexander does the weekly shopping for his household, was built upon a burial ground for Indigenous Australopes: and if you listen, if you stop your trolley in its tracks and just listen, you can hear their whispers beneath the roars of vendors, and you can smell their ghostly decay amidst the butchers' hanging carcasses. Listen carefully, because the sound of speech says more about who we are as a nation, as a nation of people, as a city of Spectators, than I could possibly reduce to a metaphor, or conceal behind any elaborate conceit, so you must take time to listen to such things.

Rows of stalls adorned with all the spring colours stream before Smoke-screen, between which heaving plastic bags in pastel colours stream through, and objects protrude from them, looking out at the world through thin plastic. Green-beds of cress and spinach, cages of squawking ducks and screeching hens, abundant colonnades, fragments of pitch soil clinging to the skin of potatoes; they all sing.

Smokescreen gets his citrus from the Anthony Artillos, junior and senior, who wake each Saturday pre-pre-pre-dawn to load their blasted truck with cardboard cartons and splintering pellets filled with apple and melon, with lemon and orange and pear and tangelo. 'Kilo of mandarins,' the senior one calls out, 'three bucks. Mandarins three bucks a kilo. Three bucks, three bucks.'

As last night receded to this morning they had bundled over the potholes of roads leading them to market. All the fruit they stock is pale and under-ripe: the bananas blush green, the avocados firm to touch, the peaches egg-white and crunchy with the consistency of potato. The junior Anthony Artillo, to avoid being barked at by senior, packs and weighs these items every weekend for customers (he calls them: *cuntstomers*). His eyes are thin and shifty and he has a slender rattail, and on his break when he gets it he finds the girl at the nut stall and takes her behind the storage hut where they touch and sort of snuffle. Her hair is red and he sort of hates her, and she is rat-faced and squinty with breasts as firm as the November peaches.

For his bean shoots and bok choy, Smokescreen visits a prim and ageless lady, whose cosmetics might well have been tattooed upon her face; her eyes do not blink beneath his gaze, and she tosses his purchase upon an archaic hanging scale. His route through the delicatessen is frustratingly impeded by a pair of overweight babyboomers, who continually state the bleedingly obvious very loudly – *price of raspberries up again* – which

inspires the gnashing of Alexander's teeth.

The couple stifle, as a good married unit, their desires for soft cheese and terrine and choose hummus dip instead to have with celery sticks and small carrots; they stock up on berries, pomegranates, mandarins, but unbeknownst to each other (or secretly acknowledged?) both of them, when they ought to be stomach-crunching at the gymnasium or sweating through spin class, wolf down fried egg breakfasts and have calamari at luncheon instead of grilled fish. Yet they still prepare the walk-in pantry for fixings of skinless chicken or poached salmon; they use low cholesterol spread instead of butter on the single bread roll they allow themselves alongside it, a mere aperitif to accompany, wordlessly resenting any medical practitioners; and when either of them go out for petrol at night, having supped on soup and home-rolled sushi, each will always devour a hot dog and chips before returning home.

Alexander goes about the place to his regular vendors, certain people whom he trusts to sell him chestnuts that haven't had their insides eaten away by worms, or walnuts without the tang of rancidity in their aftertaste. And presently his trolley is nearly full; it creaks triumphantly beneath the weight of sufficient provisions enough to keep his household fed for the week. The only stop left is to visit old Olga Besmertvenka, the coffee vendor, his favourite, whose body appears to absorb and exude cigarette smoke, and whose neck is slicked with nettle oil, and whose life is all about black bread and the mysteries observable in the bottoms of teacups. Smokescreen has never heard her voice: she's like the village witch in a fairy tale. Olga merely stretches her mouth to denude her purplish cracked teeth when he exchanges a handful of coins for one of her paper-bags of grind and smiles, winks a soot-shiny eye, and nods him away into the weekend.

Semiology

For the most part, Alexander is content to wander between *Point A* and *Point B* in life, keeping his vain musings to himself, and trying his utmost not to be rude to people. While sober, he manages not to be rude to people by not speaking aloud very much, but when he is drunk there isn't any hope for him at all. Smokescreen, after he took an indefinite sabbatical from uni, got a job assembling and maintaining the signage apparatus that fasten sexual health advertisements and drug warnings to the backs of toilet doors in nightclubs and public washrooms.

The company is owned nominally by his paternal uncle, the inventor of a signage framing device impervious to theft or tampering, but he relocated suddenly to Florence two years ago to manage a tourist restaurant near the Pitti Palace where he spends his days discreetly stuffing milky globes of bocconcini into his mouth in the privacy of the men's room. So the firm has been ostensibly in Alexander's care ever since. He refers to himself as a semiologist, by trade, but he is the only person who finds the title funny.

For the most part, working full-time is much less complicated and difficult than studying law had been. He relinquished his university course about a year and a half ago, and at last earns enough \$ to furnish him with precisely what he wants in life: a room of his own, drugs, food, and booze.

So during the week Alexander rides around town on his bicycle between bathrooms to change the advertisements and to mount more frames, and though he knows his mother named and raised him to do greater things than that, troubling himself over the abstractions of legislative discourse seems utterly pointless. The convolutions of the signage trade are far less voluble, and therefore significantly easier to interpret.

The Cave

First I'll tell you about the awful place where Alexander lives, and then I'll tell you a little bit about the two people he shares it with. Their flat in the city is colloquially known as the Cave (occasioning their distinction as the Cave Clan, collectively) and it is an ugly, stifling place, overpowered by male personalities and the interminable odour of amphetamines clinging to the air, for Smithton Smith, a speedcook, keeps his own laboratory upstairs. They benefit from an archaic tenancy agreement for a cramped and dank self-contained space in a theatre in the east end of the city that formerly belonged to the Drop family, of which Huw – the other housemate, an enduring if not flummoxing hangover from Smokescreen's secondary school – is the final descendent. Their flat extends over the fourth and fifth storeys, and the three floors below it are in an even worse state of decay than their own, even colder and more clammy in winter and more infernally suffocating in summer, and given over to theatre costumes, broken props, and denizens of cockroaches. Very occasionally, the Cave dwellers or their congenial associates might rummage through the piles of rubbish for some decorative item or piece of ephemera, but this is seldom worth

the effort. The Moorish Revival edifice of the theatre itself, crowned with onion domes and minarets and fretted with gargoyles, has paint peeling off all over it, like psoriatic skin; the clock on its tower hasn't kept the right time in longer than anybody can remember.

Having climbed up all those stairs, we discover the door of the Cave marked up with all kinds of graffiti: *Lasciate Ogni Speranza, Voi Ch'entrate*, in homage to Dante, is described in an arch across the top, but asides from that there's only stuff like *G.P.I.A – Get Pissed In Australis* scribbled everywhere. There's no doorbell, so we have to knock. The door opens into a lounge room and kitchen area, sparsely furnished but heavily cluttered; there is but one smallish window in this communal space, above the kitchen sink, and the other one looks out of Alexander's bedroom, which leads off from the lounge room next to the only bathroom. A narrow stairwell beside the narrow, messy kitchen leads to the upper floor, where Huw and Smithton keep their rooms; though Huw's room is the largest of all and boasts the only window on that floor, that of Smithton, though small and windowless, was so selected with a specific purpose in mind, as we shall see later on.

Tempter and Accuser

If Huw Drop had been asked to describe Alexander, provided that he did not take the opportunity to descend into a sequence of self-aggrandising anecdotes, he might have said: 'He is a brooding but fiercely loyal little blighter, and confides to absolutely nobody except for that hyperactive whelp of a half-sister he's got, whom he'll probably cease to adore the moment she develops a mind of her own and ceases to worship him. He is good to live with, and is generally a good listener, but irritating to have around socially. Doesn't talk much these days, except to himself. Makes a cracking risotto, and finds it difficult to maintain an erection for very long. Same goes with his relationships.'

What Huw would never have added, testifying to his matchless capacity for operating in a state of denial, is that his friend has lately become a completely different person from the Alex he knew at school, the radiant sunny Alex who seems to have fallen into the fire. They had a certain accord during their schooldays together – they were doubles partners at tennis – and the friendship has more or less stuck, as both strive to deflect, where possible, any projectiles aimed at the other's head. All differences of opinion and disputes in general are resolved, more or less, by a wordless nod and

